

At the junction of three continents, the Middle East has long been a cultural, economic, and political crossroads.

The Middlemen: The Pivotal Role of the Middle East

A 16mm sound film or videocassette—25 minutes



The Middle East was until recently a center for world trade; it is now of utmost strategic and economic importance; and it has always been the place where virtually every race and culture has met and merged. But what is the region that we call the Middle East? Why is it so troubled? And what links its disparate ethnic, religious, and political groups? The first program in The Middle East Series examines the facts and asks the questions, and the next thirteen programs, each of which approaches the region from a different point of view, try to answer them.

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The Middlemen

- Begins *The Middle East Series*, and outlines its objectives.
- Draws a contour map of the twenty-six Middle Eastern nation-states and examines it in relation to the rest of the world
- Discusses the Middle East's age-old importance as a world trade center, and its present strategic and economic value.
- Compares and contrasts the origin and language of the Jews, the Turks, the Arabs, and the Iranians—four distinct groups that comprise the Middle Eastern melting pot.



Content Summary

Why is the Middle East so troubled? How has its geography, its place on earth, affected those who live there? *The Middle East Series* contains fourteen such questions, fourteen themes that point to the region and ask why. Because the Middle East is the troubled world in miniature, the first question is of utmost importance and informs all the others. The second question is the subject of *The Middlemen: The Pivotal Role of the Middle East*.

The Middle East is comprised of twenty-six nation-states. Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq make up the “Fertile Crescent”—the region’s political and agricultural heartland on the east coast of the Mediterranean. The Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf border on the Arabian Peninsula, which stretches south from the Fertile Crescent and contains Oman, North and South Yemen, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the seven countries of the United Arab Emirates lie along the Persian Gulf; Iran and Turkey lie to the north and east of the Fertile Crescent; and Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco are in North Africa.

At the junction of Asia, Europe, and Africa, the Middle East has long been a crossroads, for a time intersected by the “Silk Road” from China, the “Spice Route” from India, and trade routes transporting gold, slaves, and ivory from Africa. Although less trade crosses the region today, the world now depends on its strategic location and its oil (70 percent of the world’s oil reserves lie beneath the Middle East).

As a link between three continents, Middle Easterners have long been “middlemen,” a mixture of Asians, Africans, and Europeans that embodies virtually every race and culture. Although 95 percent of the Middle Eastern melting pot is Muslim, political allegiance divides it into four groups: one nation-state is Jewish, one Turkish, one Iranian, and the other twenty-three are Arab.

Thousands of years ago the Arabs and the Jews emerged from the Fertile Crescent. Of the one hundred forty million Arabs in the Middle East today, most descend from those who have never lived elsewhere. Of Israel’s three and one-half million Jews, however, 40 percent are native to Europe, descendants of those who were dispersed

for some eighteen hundred years before returning to the Middle East in the late nineteenth century.

Besides their common geography, both Jews and Arabs are *Semitic*, a linguistic term taken from the biblical story of Noah. After the flood, it is said, the ancient world was divided among Noah’s three sons: Shem, who was given the Middle East; Ham, given Africa; and Japheth, given Asia. Of the terms *Semitic*, *Hamitic*, and *Japhetic*, which were used by nineteenth-century linguists to describe Middle Eastern languages, only *Semitic*, to which category Hebrew and Arabic belong, is now widely used.

A third link between Jews and Arabs is their ancestor Abraham. Jews believe that they descended from Abraham by way of his son Isaac, and Muslims believe that Arabs descended by way of his other son, Ishmael.

The Iranians, formerly the Persians, originated in Central Asia and moved, roughly thirty-five hundred years ago, into what is now Iran. The forty million Iranians speak Persian, which, like English and German, is an Indo-European language.

Like the Iranians, the Turks also originated in Central Asia, but they arrived in what is now Turkey only nine hundred years ago. The Turkish language, spoken by the forty-five million Turks, is neither Indo-European nor Semitic, but Central Asian, in the same family as Mongolian.

The Turks then are Asians who speak an Asiatic language. Their language, however, is written in a European script. The Iranians, also Asian, speak an Indo-European language written in Arabic. The Arabs, both Asian and African, speak a Semitic language written in Arabic. And the Jews, many of whom descend from Europe, speak a Semitic language written in Hebrew.

The three kings who visited the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, are depicted in many a painting as an Asian, an African, and a European—representatives of the three continents that join in the Middle East.

The Middle East Series

The Middlemen: The Pivotal Role of the Middle East (color no. 4001)

At the center of the known world for centuries, the Middle East was a geographical, commercial, ethnic, and religious crossroads. And Middle Easterners were the world's "middlemen"—an ethnocultural blend the elements of which illuminate both the Middle Eastern sensibility and the region's current instability.

The Torchbearers: Bridging the Dark Ages (color no. 4002)

Coincident with the Dark Ages in Europe, Islamic civilization in the Middle East reached its peak. Had Middle Eastern scholars not rediscovered, synthesized, and advanced the knowledge of antiquity, thus laying the groundwork for further exploration and discovery, the European Renaissance and Western civilization as we now know it might never have been.

Holy Land: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Middle East (color no. 4003)

As the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—three of the world's great monotheistic religions—the Middle East has come to be known as the "Holy Land," yet despite the reverence and awe this region's history inspires, disputes based on long-standing religious claims to the land continue to rend its contemporary fabric.

Family Matters: The Role of the Family in the Middle East (color no. 4004)

Traditionally the model upon which social and political life has been based, the large, extended, and patriarchal Middle Eastern family has begun to fragment under Western influence. Although rapid westernization has benefited many, fundamentalists have tried to save the old society by reviving traditional ways, thus heightening regional tensions.

New Frontiers: The Middle East following World War I (color no. 4005)

The nation-states of the Middle East that today wage war for territory and power did not exist before World War I. By creating artificial frontiers and introducing the alien concept of nationalism, a concept that superseded the traditional Middle Eastern identity based on family and religion, certain Western powers may unknowingly have set the stage for today's conflicts.

Captains and Kings: Authority in the Middle East (color no. 4006)

Compelled by ancient precedents and the tenets of Islam to accept authoritarian rule, Middle Eastern nations (except for Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel, each of which is marred by factionalism and religious strife) have resisted the imposition of Western-style governments and still sanction the military regime or the monarchy.

Sects and Violence: Fragmentation within Religions (color no. 4007)

Although sectarian differences between Jews, Christians, and Muslims are a main ingredient of Middle East tensions, the struggle for power and territory is also rife among divergent sects within each faith who are trying to legitimize their religious beliefs and principles.

Ancient and Modern: The Fall and Rise of the Middle East (color no. 4008)

In this century Middle Eastern independence and oil wealth have reversed the region's downward trend that began, ironically, in the midst of Europe's rebirth. State-of-the-art technology has not, however, replaced tradition; the two coexist in an uneasy alliance.

The Story of Oil: Chief Economic Resource of the Middle East (color no. 4009)

Beneath the sand and rock of the Middle East lie two-thirds of the world's known oil reserves. An object of exploitation since ancient times and a cause of current tension within and without the Middle East, oil has nonetheless brought great wealth—though unequally distributed—to a poor region.

Independence: Egypt & Algeria (color no. 4010)

Between the first and second world wars the Middle East moved from a religious and familial consciousness into one that was national and secular. Triggered in part by the decline of European colonial power, this shift effected the independence of Egypt and Algeria after World War II.

Homeland: Israel & Palestine (color no. 4011)

Promised to both the Arabs and the Jews by the British and partitioned by the United Nations into two states, Palestine, which became the independent State of Israel in 1948, is still the object of a protracted struggle between Israelis and Palestinian nationalists, both of whom maintain ancient claims to the territory.

Revolution: Iraq & Iran (color no. 4012)

Since World War II internal political revolutions in such countries as Iraq and Iran have been a salient feature of Middle East politics. Caused in part by postwar economic instability and the withdrawal of colonial powers, the initial unrest was largely a response to Western exploitation.

Change: Turkey & Saudi Arabia (color no. 4013)

Opposites on an ideological spectrum, Turkey and Saudi Arabia best illustrate how nonviolent change has affected the Middle East since World War I. Saudi Arabia entered the modern age with its Arab, Islamic soul intact; Turkey cast aside its heritage to modernize only to draw opposition from traditionalists over the heavy cost of progress.

Identity: Lebanon (color no. 4014)

The religious and civil dissension that has beset Lebanon since the withdrawal of the French in 1946 began with a national identity crisis. Because the Lebanese embody all the elements that now determine the Middle Eastern identity, their recent history may be read as a history in microcosm of twentieth-century Middle East instability.



For Discussion

1. Examine topographic and contour maps of the Middle East. Trace the ancient trade routes, identify areas of strategic importance to the superpowers, and locate the Middle Eastern borders of Asia, Europe, and Africa.
2. Research the origin of the term *Middle East*. What area did it initially describe? Describe the film's geographical definition of the Middle East. Why do you think the twenty-six nation-states are grouped together, given their ethnic, religious, and geographical differences?
3. Compare and contrast the history of the Jews and the Arabs in the Middle East. Where did they originate? When and why did their parallel histories diverge?
4. How many Middle Eastern nation-states are Arab? Among what three groups is Israel's population divided?
5. Describe the source of the terms *Semitic*, *Hamitic*, and *Japhetic*. Research their nineteenth-century linguistic applications. Why are Arabic and Hebrew both classed as Semitic languages? When and how did their written forms develop? How did the term Semitic evolve to describe racial and physical characteristics?
6. Although the Jews and the Arabs both claim Abraham as their ancestor, from whom in particular did each group descend? How does the Bible describe the two brothers?
7. Research the development of Persian and Turkish—the first, an Indo-European language; the second, a Central Asian language. When and how did their written forms develop?
8. In what ways is the Middle East the troubled world in miniature? What can be gained from studying the region?

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